Part 1

Now in these days the Lord God had turned His face from the business of men; and the angels who had remained loyal to Him said to one another, we must look after the children of Adam. And they did so, as best they could.

Now also the third part of the angels who had rebelled looked upon the earth, and saw the hand of God withdrawn from it; and the air was cold in the valleys of men, and the sea was also cold.

And one of the fallen angels, whose name was Uzziel, said, it was for man's sake that we were cast down, for we would not bend our knee to him; let us test the Lord and see what He will do if we afflict their mightiest kingdoms with hunger. And this angel rose from the waters of the sea and made rain; and the spikes of wheat and the ears of barley were heavy with that rain, and they fell into the mud, or withered, or went to rot; and the livestock were made sick, and they died in great numbers; and in their turn, the children of Adam knew hunger; and men devoured all there was, and there was no more. And many died. And some would go into the dead-yard and eat of the newly buried. And the babes born during those years who lived to be children had only twenty-two teeth.

And the Lord made no answer.

Now another of the fallen, whose name was Beliel, said, it was for man's sake that the war began in Heaven; so let us try them with wars in their greatest kingdoms; and he rose through the wells of a king who ruled a mighty island, and blew pride into his mouth; and when this king spoke, he swore that he would have the crown of an even greater kingdom, which he would

take with the sword. And so he came upon his neighbor's shore under arms and with banners. Now the greater king, seeing that his land was in peril, sent out a mighty host in armor of iron and silver; and they rode against the men of the island, who shot them with arrows, even through their armor, and they died. And so the long war began.

And the Lord made no answer.

So it came that the first among the fallen, whose name was Lucifer, said, our old enemy sleeps; if we do not seize this hour, we will come to the End of Days as He has written them, and He will grind us under His heel, and destroy us forever; let us rise against Him now in all our numbers, and pull the walls of Heaven down, and shake out the souls of the just; and let us seize our brother angels by the throat, and cast them down into Hell; and let us live as once we did, upon the Great Height.

But some were fearful of the power of the angels of God, whose numbers were greater, and whose generals were Uriel, and Gabriel, and Michael, who had broken the back of Lucifer and sent him into the hot coals in the belly of the earth to blacken his face with soot and know he was lower than the Lord.

And some were fearful that God would wake from His drowsiness and rack them with pains and fires even they had not learned to endure, or destroy them utterly.

And the first among the fallen spoke to them, saying, then let us test Him one more time; it is for man's sake that we were insulted, for his sake that we were driven out, and for his peace that we are mortared under; let us break the roof of Hell with our fists and murder the seed of Adam; for if God will not rouse Himself to save His favorite creature, His sleep is deep, and we may catch Him by the hair, and cast Him down.

And one of the fallen, whose name was Azazel, said, shall we kill them with fire or with cold?

And Lucifer spoke to him, saying, neither of these.

What then, said the wicked angel.

With a Great Plague, answered Lucifer.

And so it was.

And the years that had passed since the Lord had come to be born among men were one thousand three hundred forty-eight.

ONE

Of the Donkey

The soldiers found the donkey on Friday. It was lame and its ribs were easy to count; it was too weak to run from them or even to bray at them, but it didn't seem to have the disease. It was just old.

It looked at them hopefully from beneath a willow tree, swishing its tail against the flies. The fat one, and nobody knew how he stayed fat, took his war hammer up, meaning to brain it, but Thomas stopped him. He pointed at the barn. It would be smarter to walk it to the barn first, where they could shelter against the coming rain. Godefroy nodded his agreement.

The four men had been on the road in their rags and rusty armor without a good meal for many weeks, living on spoiled food from houses, watercress and cattail tops from ditches, worms, bugs, acorns, and even a rotten cat. They had all eaten so much grass that they had green piss. The disease was ruthless here; it had killed so many farmers that there was no bread even in this fertile valley. There were not enough hands to swing scythes, nor enough women willing to gather for the threshing, nor any miller to grind, nor bakers to stoke the ovens. The sickness, which they called the Great Death, passed mysteriously but surely from one to the other as easily as men might clasp hands, or a child might call a friend's name, or two women might share a glance. Now none looked at their neighbors, nor spoke to them. It had fallen so heavily upon this part of Normandy that the dead could not be buried; they were piled outside in their dirty long shirts and they stank in

the August sun and the flies swarmed around them. They lay in weed-choked fields of rye and oats where they had fled in delirium. They lay pitifully in the shadow of the town church where they had crawled hoping that last gesture would lessen their time in purgatory, stuck like glued birds to the limestone where they had tried to cool their fevered heads. Some fouled in houses because they were the last and there was no one to put them out. Those with means had fled, but many times it dogged them even into the hills and swamps and manors and killed them there.

The soldiers made a fire in the barn just near a small creek and a still house. The wood was damp and smoked unpleasantly, besooting the unchimneyed barn, but soon they were carving meat from the donkey's haunches, running sticks through it, eating it almost raw because they couldn't wait for the fire to do its work, licking their bloody fingers, nodding at each other because their mouths were too full for them to say how good it was.

The sun was setting orange beneath a break in pewter clouds that had just begun to spit rain when the girl poked her head in the barn door.

"Hello," she said.

All of the men stopped chewing except Thomas.

She was a bad age to meet these men; just too old to be safe and just too young to know why. Her flaxen hair, which might have been pretty if it were not greasy and wet, hung damply on her neck, and her feet were growing before the rest of her, looking too big for her sticklike legs.

"Hello," she said again.

"Hello, yourself," Godefroy said, leaning his lanky body toward her like a cat sighting on a bird.

"You're eating Parsnip," she said matter-of-factly.

"It's donkey. Would you like some?"

This last would have sounded friendly except that Godefroy patted the rotten beam he was sitting on. She should sit near him if she wanted food.

"No. She was tied up in the woods to hide her, but she must have gotten loose. Her name is Parsnip," she said.

"Well," Thomas said, "that's lucky for us. We're not supposed to eat meat on Friday, but parsnip is perfectly permissible."

The others laughed.

"The mouth on you, Thomas," Godefroy said, lingering on the final *s*, which Thomas's half-Spanish mother had insisted on pronouncing. "To the whoring manor born."

"Is it Friday?" the fat one said. Both Thomas and Jacquot, the one with the drooping eye, nodded.

Only Thomas kept eating. The rest watched the girl. The girl stood there.

"Come sit near me," Godefroy said, patting the beam again. With his other hand he brushed back a wick of his stringy black hair. He wore jewelry that didn't seem to belong on such a dirty man. Her eye fixed on a cross of jasper on a gold necklace; something the seigneur's wife might wear.

"I need help," she said.

"Come sit here and tell me about it."

Nobody wanted strangers close these days; she began to realize there was something dark in this man's mind.

the word is rape he'll rape me

She thought about turning and running to her tree, but an angel had shown her these men, and pointed to the barn. She knew it was an angel because his (her?) pretty auburn hair didn't seem to get wet in the rain, and because he (she?) looked like something between a man and a woman, but more beautiful than either; it just pointed and said, *Go and see*. When angels spoke to her, and she had seen perhaps three, they spoke the same Norman French she spoke, and she found that odd. Shouldn't they sound like foreigners?

She put her faith in the angel even though it was gone now.

It was that angel whom she saw most often, and she liked to think it was hers.

She didn't run.

"I need help putting Papa in a grave."

"Silly bitch, there aren't any graves anymore. We're in a grave already, all of us. Just stack his bones outside. Someone will get him."

"Who?"

"How the devil should I know? This is your sad little village. Maybe some nuns or monks or something. Anyway, everyone else is just putting them outside."

"I can't lift him."

"Well, I won't lift him. I didn't live this long to catch it by hauling around dead serfs."

"He's not a serf."

"I really don't give a shit."

"Please."

"Forget it, girl," Thomas said. "Go back in the house now."

This man was different; he didn't frighten her, even though he was the biggest of them; exotic with his longish dark hair; handsome despite a nose that had been broken more than once and a round, pitted scar on his cheek. He had more armor than the others, some on his legs and shoulders, as well as a longer coat of mail. But over his chain mail hood he wore a peasant's big straw hat with a horn spoon through a hole in it; he was clearly dangerous, but also just a little ridiculous. He had spoken gruffly, but in the way that a man barks at a child to make the child act swiftly when there's trouble.

She liked him.

"Wait a minute," Godefroy said, dismissing Thomas, and now addressing the girl. "How much is it worth to you?"

Brigands. That was the word for what these men were; men who were soldiers before the war with the English, but who now traveled the roads, or hid in the woods and robbed people.

Even before the plague had come, her papa had spoken with their neighbors about what to do if brigands came.

Now they were here and no one could help her.

Why had the angel left? Why had he pushed her toward these thieves?

"We only have a little silver," she said, "and some books."

"I don't want silver."

"The books are very good. Most of them are new ones from the university in Paris."

"Books are for wiping my ass with. I want gold."

"I don't have any."

"Of course you do."

Godefroy got up now, and Thomas stopped eating. Godefroy went over to her and pointed two fingers at where her pubis would be beneath her dirty gown.

"Right there," he said. "Haven't you? Haven't you got just a little gold there already?"

The fat one was the only one who laughed, but it was hollow. None of them liked this about their leader: his taste for the very green fruit. She had the fine bones and small build of a child, but her gaze was more than a girl's; she was probably just on the eve of her first bleeding. If she lived, she would be tall next summer.

"Christ crucified, Godefroy, let her alone," Thomas said.

"That's only for my husband."

"Ha!" Godefroy barked, pleased at this touch of worldliness. "And where is he?"

"I don't know."

"He shouldn't leave you alone."

"I mean I don't know who he is. I am not yet promised."

"Then I'll be your husband."

"I should go now."

"We'll all be your husbands. We're good husbands."

"She could have it," the fat one warned, eating again now.

"I'd rather get it from her than her papa."

"Leave her alone," Thomas said, and this time it wasn't a request. He put his straw hat beside him. He tried to do it casually, but the fat one saw it and, also trying to be circumspect, spat out the overlarge piece of donkey he had just taken and set the rest on his leather bag.

Godefroy turned to face Thomas.

The girl slipped out the door.

"What if I don't want to leave her alone?" Godefroy said.

"She's just a scared little girl in a dead-house. Either she's full of it and you'll breathe it in from her, or she's shielded by God's hand. Which would be even worse for us. Save your 'husbanding' for whores."

"The whores are all dead," said Jacquot.

"Surely not all of them," said Thomas, trying one last time. "And if one whore in France still has a warm *chatte*, Godefroy will smell it out."

"You're funny," Godefroy said. "You've always been funny, Thomas. But I need to fuck something. Go get that girl."

"No."

Thomas stood. Godefroy backed up a little in spite of his nominal leadership. Thomas had white coming into his beard and lines on his face; he was the oldest of the four, but the muscles in his arms and on either side of his neck made him look like a bullock. His thighs were hard as roof beams, and he had a ready bend in his knees. They had all fought in the war against the English, but he alone among them had been trained as a knight.

Godefroy noted where his sword was, and Thomas noted that.

Thomas breathed in like a bellows and blew out through clenched teeth. He did this twice. They had all seen him do this before, but never while facing them.

A drop of sweat rolled down Godefroy's nose.

"I'll get her," Jacquot said, proud of himself for thinking of a compromise. He went out of the barn into the rain, pulling his coarse red hood up. He held the hood's long tail over his nose and mouth against the smell pouring out of the house as he pushed the door open with his foot. The sun was almost down now, but the house was still full of trapped heat. The smell was blinding. Wan light coming from the polished horn slats in the windows shone on the rictus of a very bloated dead man who had stained his sheets atop a mess of straw that could no longer be called a bed; he had kicked hard at the end of it. His face was black. His shirt rippled; maggots crawled exuberantly on him, as well as on two goats and a pig that had wandered into the single-room dwelling to die.

The girl wasn't here, and even if she had been, Jacquot didn't want to find her badly enough to stay in that hot, godless room.

He would have preferred to go back to the barn then, but his failure would only put Godefroy in a worse humor. So he went around the back of the house, thankful for the cooler air, and whistled for her. He stood very still and looked around carefully. His patience was soon rewarded; he noticed her white leg up in a tree. Ten minutes later and it would have been dark enough to hide her.

She was up in her tree, whispering for the angel and asking it to come back; but then she wasn't sure anyone else could see them, or that they could do anything or lift anything. Or even that they were real. She had only started seeing them since the Great Death came on.

She thought that the ones she was seeing were lesser ones, that the famous ones like Gabriel were preparing for Judgment Day, which must be soon. Gabriel would blow his horn and all the Dead in Christ would get out of their graves; she knew this

was supposed to be a good thing, but the idea of dead bodies moving again was the worst thing she could imagine; it frightened her so much she couldn't sleep sometimes.

If the angels were real, why had she been abandoned now?

And why weren't they helping anybody when they got sick?

Why had they let her father die so horribly?

And now the man with the drooping eye had seen her.

Why did her angel not strike this man blind, as they had done to the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah?

"Come down, little bird," Jacquot said. "We won't hurt you."

"Yes, you will," she said, gathering her leg up under her gown as well as she could.

"All right, we will. But not much and not for long. Maybe just a night and a morning. Then we'll be on our way. Or, better yet! We might take you with us. Would you like that? Four strong husbands and passage out of town?"

"No, thank you."

He leapt up onto a strong, low branch, almost high enough now to reach her foot, but she climbed higher. She was much lighter than he. He would lose this game.

"Don't be trouble," he said.

"Don't rape me," she said.

"It won't be rape if you agree."

"Yes, it will. Because I'll only agree to avoid being hurt."

"So there we have it. You'll agree to avoid being hurt. Very well. Come down or I'll hurt you."

He dropped back down to the ground.

"You don't mean it," she said.

"I do."

"You're not a bad man. I don't believe you are."

"I'm afraid I am."

"But you don't have to be!"

"Sorry. Already am. Now I see a bunch of lovely stones by

the stream. What say I go get them and throw them at you until you come down?"

The foliage wouldn't allow for much stone-throwing, and he wasn't sure he could make himself throw a stone at her in any case, but he said it as if he meant it. He sensed he had to get her to the barn quickly.

"Please don't."

"Then come down."

"It's the other one. He's the bad one. Tell him you couldn't find me."

"He has a temper."

"So does my father."

"He's dead."

"No, he's not."

"Enough games. Come down or I knock you down with stones."

She was crying now. He thought she would call his bluff, but soon she probed for a lower branch with her long, ungainly foot. He helped her down and felt her trembling. He felt sick about what he was doing, but hardened his heart. He decided to talk to her about it while he hoisted her up on his shoulder and walked back toward the barn.

"I know this seems awful, but it really isn't. If God wanted order and goodness in the world, He shouldn't have made things quite so hard on us. We're all dead men, and women. He wants chaos and death? He gets them, and what say do we have in it? All we can do is try to have a little fun before the mower comes for us, eh? And he will come for us. If you relax, you might not have such a bad time."

"You're just saying these things to make yourself feel better," she said, breathing hard in fear for what was about to happen.

"You're a smart girl. Too smart. This world's not made for smart girls. Here we are."

So saying, he used his free hand to open the barn door.

"Mary, Mother of God," he said.

Godefroy was breathing his last rough breaths face down in the dirt with a hole in his head that was pouring an arc of blood like a hole in a tight wineskin. His hands were shaking. The fat one was slumped against the wall and looked like a sleepy child with his chin on his chest, except he was drenched in blood and the head sat wrong because it was barely attached. His hand was off just below where the chain mail ended. It was nearby, still clutching his wicked hammer. His killer had put the sword exactly where he wanted it, and with great strength.

"Put her down," Thomas said.

"I will."

The sword's point poked Jacquot's woolen hood and settled just behind his ear. He knew the man wielding it could drive it through both hood and skull as easily as into a melon.

"Please don't kill me," Jacquot said.

"I have to, or I can't sleep here."

"I'll leave."

"You'll come back and cut my throat at night out of love for Godefroy. He is your cousin."

"On my mother's side. And I didn't like my mother."

"Sorry, Jacquot."

"You could leave."

"I'm too tired. And you would find me."

"No."

"Put her down so she doesn't get hurt."

"No."

"Do you really want your last earthly act to be trying to hide behind a girl you nearly raped?"

He put her down, then put his hands over his eyes. But while Thomas was trying to work up the will to strike, the girl stood in front of the smaller man.

"Don't kill him," she said.

She looked up at Thomas, and he noticed how very light and

gray her eyes were. Like the flint in the walls of the barn, but luminous. Like an overcast sky on the verge of turning blue.

Thomas lowered his sword.

The rain stopped.

"Don't kill anybody else again."